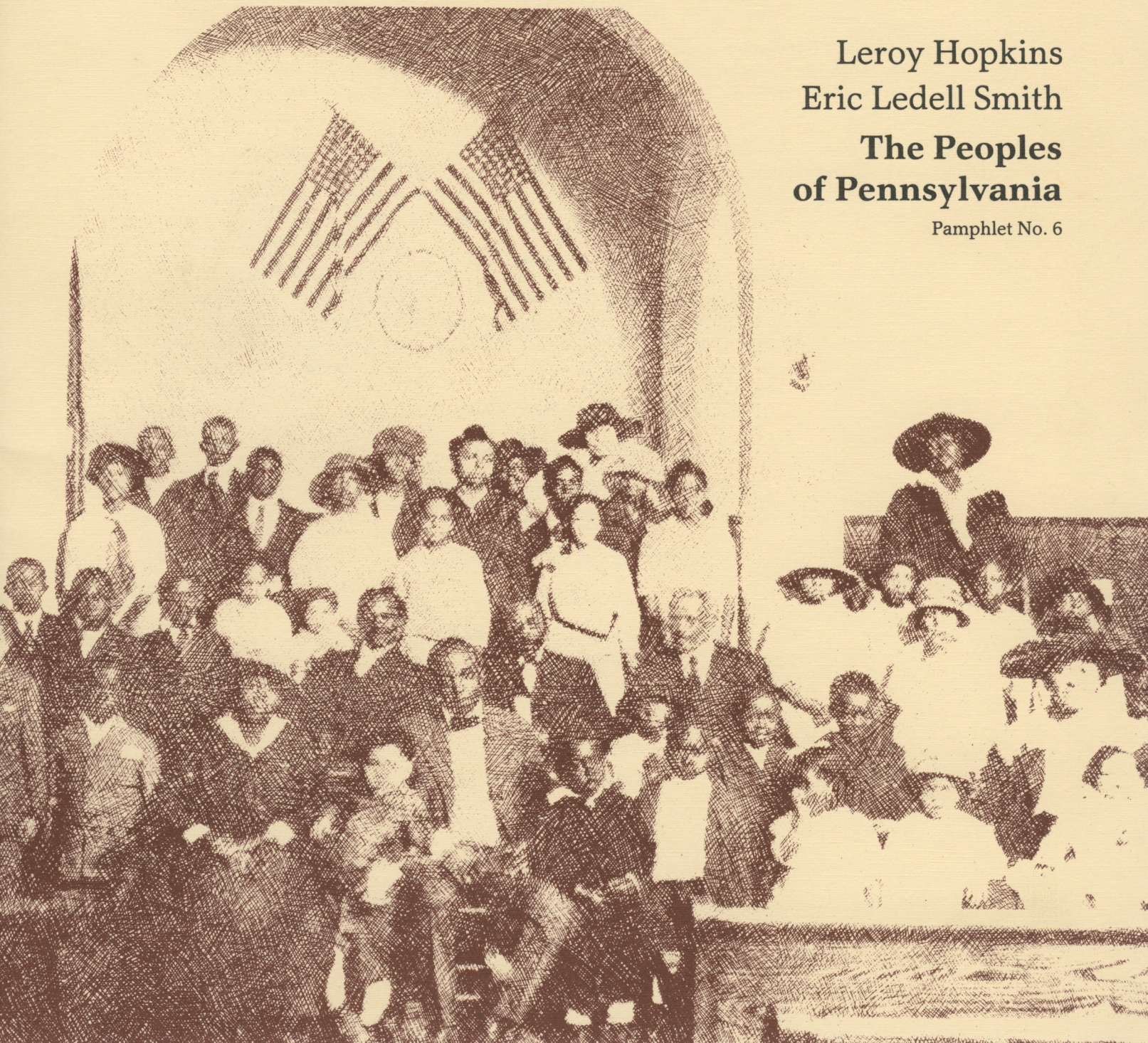


# The African Americans in Pennsylvania

Leroy Hopkins  
Eric Ledell Smith  
**The Peoples  
of Pennsylvania**

Pamphlet No. 6





# THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION

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## Foreword

**T**he United States is composed of people from many cultural and national backgrounds. Americans can trace their ancestry to Europeans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Australians and American Indians. Today, our population consists of people from over one hundred ethnic groups.

Since its founding in 1681, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been among the states with the greatest diversity of population. While Pennsylvanians share a common regional and political identity, they also form a mixture of national and ethnic cultures and religious traditions. No history of the Commonwealth would be adequate without coverage of the rich diversity of Pennsylvania's populace.

Thus, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is publishing these booklets which depict ethnic groups as a means of introducing to the public the history of the many peoples who have made Pennsylvania's history and who have built this great Commonwealth. In this way the Commission continues its efforts to preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of all Pennsylvanians.

**Cover:** The Sabbath School of the Shiloh Baptist Church, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, photographed in 1919. Courtesy Ruth E. Hodge.

**The African Americans in Pennsylvania**

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# The African Americans in Pennsylvania

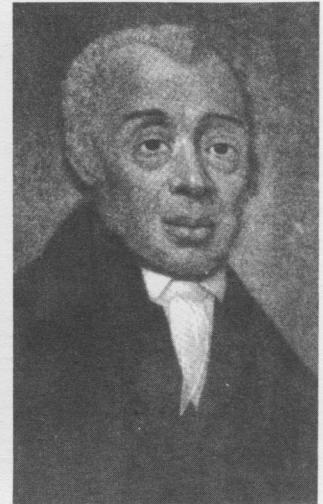
The African-American presence in Pennsylvania is the result of numerous waves of immigrants who have settled in the Commonwealth over the past three centuries. Unlike other immigrants, African Americans arrived in the colonies, and in the United States initially, against their will as slaves. The slaves were citizens of nations and kingdoms mainly of West Africa. The Mossi, Hausa, Kanem-Bornu, and Benin states were nations that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, occupying what was earlier territory of the great Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. Some African Americans, like the writer Alex Haley, have been able to use oral history to trace their family genealogy to a particular African nation. Since many African-American families may not have this oral tradition and because of the lack of genealogical documentation for the period of American slavery, they cannot point to a specific African nation of ancestry. They choose, instead, to call themselves "African Americans." While the story of African Americans in Pennsylvania is one of struggle for human rights and identity, it is a story also of achievement and the assertion of ethnic pride. As the state's fifth largest ethnic group, African Americans have had a significant impact on the history of Pennsylvania.

## Involuntary Migration

Pennsylvania's first African-Americans lived in the Delaware River valley region as early as 1639. Philadelphia became the major Pennsylvania port for the arrival of slaves, at first from South Carolina and the Caribbean and later directly from Africa. In 1684, the ship "Isabella" landed in Philadelphia carrying 150 slaves from Africa by way of Bristol, England. About 1729, the market demand for slaves in Pennsylvania increased due to the greater utilization of Africans for skilled labor. Since a plantation economy did not develop in Pennsylvania as it did in the South, slaves were likely to work alongside their masters as sailmakers, bakers, carpenters, charcoal-iron workers, farmhands, or domestic servants. The start of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) slowed ethnic immigration to the state. Around 1762, however, Quaker merchants and Scotch, Irish, and German Pennsylvanians began to import slaves directly from Africa. For instance, eight of the fourteen ships carrying Africans to Philadelphia between 1759 and 1766 were recorded as entering from "Africa" or "Guinea" or "Gambia" or the "Gold Coast" (modern-day Ghana). Resistance to slave-import taxes and the institution of slavery itself (both by African Americans and by a number of

Quakers) led to a ban on slave importation in Pennsylvania in 1767.

During the American Revolutionary War, African Americans fought on Pennsylvania soil at Brandywine and served at Valley Forge. Among those who crossed the Delaware River with George Washington in December 1776 were Isaac Jones, Billy Lee, and Prince Whipple. Many African Americans won their freedom fighting either for the British or the Americans in that war. In 1780, Pennsylvania formally ended slavery by passing a gradual emancipation law. The law stipulated that no African American born after 1780 in Pennsylvania would be enslaved past the age of twenty-eight.

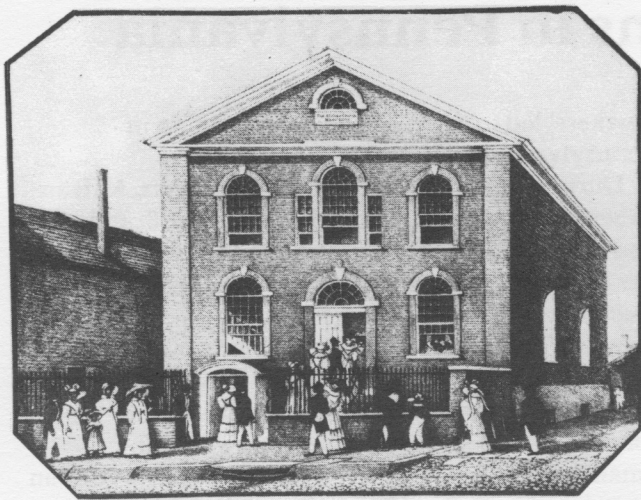


*Revs. Absalom Jones (left) and Richard Allen*

As the number of free blacks grew, so did the size of the state's African-American community, which was centered in Philadelphia. It was in Philadelphia in 1787 that Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, the community's most prominent religious leaders, organized the Free African Society, one of the first black mutual aid societies anywhere. It provided for the burial of the dead, care of the sick, and support of widows and orphans in the black community. Philadelphia's Free African Society was part of an effort to organize free blacks that extended across the Mid-Atlantic states into New England. Fraternal organizations began to play a prominent role in the social life of the African-American community. For instance, Absalom Jones was the first Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Pennsylvania.

In 1790 freemen — both black and white, it was widely assumed — were guaranteed the right to vote by the newly adopted state constitution. In 1794, Richard Allen founded the Mother Bethel African





*St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, on a Sunday morning in 1829.*

Methodist Episcopal Church, and Absalom Jones formed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. For African Americans, the black church was more than a place of worship: it was a place where one could find counsel and shelter in times of trouble, fellowship and music during worship, and inspired leadership from one's pastor.

## Abolitionism

The struggle to gain control of their own institutions was only one of the goals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among African-American Pennsylvanians. Another was abolition — the elimination of slavery from American soil. In 1775, the first abolitionist group — the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage — met in Philadelphia. It was composed mainly of Quakers. After the Revolutionary War, in 1787, the group reorganized under the name Pennsylvania Abolition Society. It operated a school for black children in Philadelphia called Clarkson Hall. In 1833, two more abolitionist groups formed in Philadelphia, the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society. The latter group brought together African-American women, such as Sarah Douglas, Harriet Forten Purvis, Sarah Forten, and Margaretta Forten, who supported the antislavery cause through fundraising. A related organization — the Philadelphia Colored Female Free Produce Society — boycotted products produced by slave labor and exerted economic pressure on slave states.

In Harrisburg in 1837, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society was formed; its black members included James Forten, Robert Purvis, James McCrummell and Stephen Smith. In 1838, a meeting-house for abolitionists in Philadelphia called Pennsylvania Hall was set afire by an angry mob. Clearly, Pennsylvanians in 1838 were deeply divided on the abolition question.

Blacks in Pennsylvania, meanwhile, had enjoyed the freedom to vote under the constitution of 1790. During the state constitutional convention of 1837-1838, however, politicians argued that the constitution did not clearly confer suffrage on the African American. The debate was influenced by a number of issues. In 1835, an African American in Luzerne County had had to sue to exercise his right to vote, and would be declared ineligible as a freeman by the State Supreme Court. State Democrats believed that they had lost an election in Bucks County because blacks had been permitted to vote, and feared that they might suffer future losses. Furthermore, the annual national black conventions in Philadelphia, where African Americans met to discuss such issues as civil rights and black migration to Canada, caused concern among whites. Finally, it should be noted that a number of Northern states at this time had curtailed the right of African Americans to vote. African Americans in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia led the way in opposing the proposed constitutional ban; this culminated in a plea by Robert Purvis and others called "The Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement to the People of Pennsylvania." Nevertheless, the new state constitution of 1838 declared only "white freemen" eligible to vote. In 1838, William Whipper provided blacks with a means to speak out against such injustices when he founded the first black newspaper in the state, *The National Reformer*.

## The Underground Railroad

Perhaps nothing in antebellum history demonstrates the strength and determination of the African-American and abolitionist communities as well as the success of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania.

The term "underground railroad" was applied to the secret network of cooperation among slaves, free blacks, and whites that helped slaves escape to freedom in the North and in Canada. Legend has it that the phrase "underground railroad" was coined as a result of an incident in Columbia, Pennsylvania. In 1804, Nancy Smith arrived in Columbia seeking her five-year-old son, Stephen, who had been purchased as a slave by Thomas Boude. The mother's slave mistress, however, followed her, intending to return her to slavery. Boude and the townspeople intervened, and the slave mistress was forced to leave without her former slave. Although more anecdote than fact, the story is significant because Stephen Smith later became an important conductor on the Underground Railroad, along with William Whipper and William Goodridge. In 1842, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* that states were not necessarily obliged to help slavecatchers. As a result of this ruling, entry into



Pennsylvania by fugitive slaves became equivalent to manumission and freedom. African Americans founded a number of all-black communities, notably "Freedom Road" in Mercer County, "Africa" in Franklin County, Wilmore in Cambria County, "Hayti" in Chester county, and "Guinea Run" in Bucks County. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which confirmed the right of slave owners to seize their fugitive slaves and denied blacks the right to a trial by jury, made escape to Canada a more appealing destination for African Americans.

## The Civil War and Reconstruction

In 1863, with the Civil War well underway, the first of 1,100 black recruits arrived at Camp William Penn at LaMott, Pennsylvania. This was the first-ever black U.S. Army military school and the first-ever authorized employment of African Americans in the Army as enlisted soldiers. The soldiers were part of the U.S. Colored Troops, fighting in twelve different units. Pennsylvania blacks also fought as part as of the famous Massachusetts 54th and 55th Volunteers. Many African-American Pennsylvanians fought in battles in the South, winning recognition for their valor. Christian Fleetwood, a sergeant major, was awarded the Medal of Honor; Stephen Swails from Columbia was the first to be promoted to officer's rank from the field; journalist Martin Delany became the first African-American major in the U.S. Army; and Thomas Morris Chester of Harrisburg gained recognition as an African-American correspondent during the war.

As the war ended, Philadelphians formed the Equal Rights League to protest streetcar segregation in 1865. After the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870, African-American Pennsylvanians gained the right to vote for the first time since 1837. But the first election was accompanied by violence; black Philadelphia leader



*The Pittsburgh Crawfords, 1926. The Crawfords and the Homestead Grays brought fame to African-American baseball in southwestern Pennsylvania in the pre-1950 era.*

Octavius Catto was murdered during the 1871 election. In 1872, blacks participated in a presidential nominating committee for the first time at the Republican Convention in Philadelphia. African Americans were further empowered at this time by the formation of the Citizens Republican Club in Philadelphia.

## The Great Migration

In 1911, the brutal lynching of Zachariah Walker in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, shocked the nation and prompted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to investigate and call for an end to lynching nationwide. The NAACP also established local chapters in Coatesville, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia as a result of the Walker lynching. Southern blacks had been



*Henry O. Tanner*

recruited to work in Coatesville, with its iron and steel mills located just twenty miles north of the Maryland state line. In fact, sporadically after the Civil War and in a veritable flood after 1915, black Southern migrants came into Pennsylvania. They were recruited for the steel industries of Steelton and Pittsburgh, the coal mines of southwestern Pennsylvania, the railroad industry in Erie and Harrisburg, and domestic and shipyard work in Philadelphia, all of which were growing rapidly in the early twentieth century. African Americans in the South were likely to migrate to Pennsylvania because it offered relatively high wages, as well as an opportunity to live outside the Southern Jim Crow environment. Improved railroad connections between Pennsylvania and the South played a decisive role in the Great Migration. The Pennsylvania and Baltimore and Ohio Railroads began, around 1916, to transport large numbers of Southern migrants. Companies persuaded the railroads to provide free train rides to migrants, who, upon arrival, would allow the employers to deduct



transportation costs from their wages. But for most migrants, life in Pennsylvania was much harder than they had been led to believe by their employers and by black newspapers.

In the mills and mines, African Americans were excluded from labor unions and relegated to the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs. Companies recruiting migrant workers made little provision for their workers' housing. Invariably, blacks were forced to relocate to already overcrowded neighborhoods,



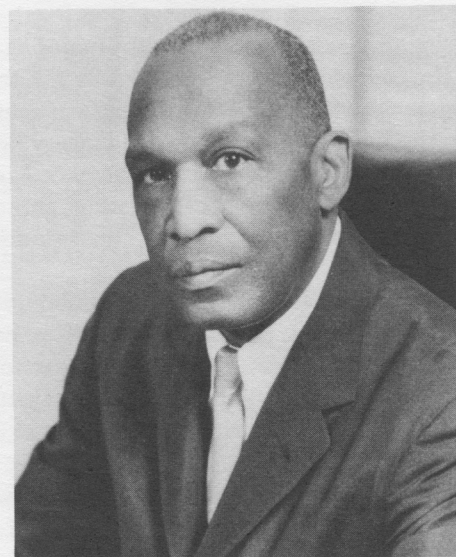
*Marian Anderson*

where they competed with European immigrants for substandard housing. In addition, Jim Crow accommodations were common in early twentieth-century Pennsylvania, and as the Coatesville lynching demonstrated, the state was not free from the violence and criminal behavior of the Ku Klux Klan and other racist organizations.

During the First World War, blacks in Pennsylvania fought in the 92nd and 93rd divisions of the U.S. Army. Once again, Camp William Penn at LaMott was a major training center for African Americans. After the war, however, the black veterans returned home to face race riots, lynching, and other indignities, beginning with riots in Chester in 1917 and in Philadelphia in 1918. As a result of the Philadelphia riot, however, the African-American community recognized the need to organize against racial discrimination, and did so with the assistance of such groups as the Armstrong Association, the NAACP, and the Urban League. Fraternal orders like the Freemasons, the Elks, and the Oddfellows, as well as black fraternities and sororities, also addressed migrants' problems. Meanwhile, as prejudice had the ironic effect of promoting black self-help, so black entrepreneurs like barbers, beauticians, funeral home directors, insurers, and caterers became prominent in the African-American communities in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg. Educational institutions

like Lincoln University and Cheyney State College enrolled black students nationwide.

Wartime production during the Second World War continued to attract Southern blacks to Pennsylvania. Steel mills in Pittsburgh and shipyards in Philadelphia employed many African Americans. Black women contributed also to the war effort, serving in the WAVES and WACS and in many factories. After the war, the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh witnessed a dramatic flight of whites from the inner city. The growth of the state highway system, the development of new suburbs, the relocation of companies like Westinghouse in Pittsburgh to other areas, as well as increased racial tension, were factors in this population shift. In some areas the demographic change was dramatic. The Homewood Brushton district of Pittsburgh went from twenty-two percent black in 1950 to sixty-six percent in 1960. Unfortunately, despite this population change, employment opportunities in the inner city did not improve for African Americans. In 1963, for example, African Americans protested the lack of minority construction workers at a site in Philadelphia's Strawberry Mansion neighborhood.



*Congressman Robert N. C. Nix, Sr.*

The 1960s saw many civil rights demonstrations, as well as riots, in Pennsylvania. On August 28, 1964, a riot erupted in Philadelphia, and on April 4, 1968, civil disorder began after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Protest of Girard College's exclusion of blacks in 1966 focused nationwide attention on Pennsylvania. As black activism increased, meanwhile, so did the number of black legislators — most notably Robert N. C. Nix, Sr., Pennsylvania's first African-American congressman in 1958. In 1993, there were fifteen black members in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and three state senators. W. Wilson Goode, Sr., was elected Philadelphia's first African-American mayor in 1983.



## Individual Achievements

Throughout their history, many African-American Pennsylvanians have made significant contributions, including classical musicians Marian Anderson, Harry T. Burleigh, Clamma Dale, and Florence Quivar; jazz musicians Billy Eckstine, Erroll Garner, Philly Joe Jones, Jimmy Smith, and Joe Williams; popular musicians, the "Boys II Men," Chubby Checker, and Ethel Waters; writers David Bradley, Ed Bullins, Charlotte Forten, Charles Fuller, Kristin Hunter, Alan Locke, John Edgar Wideman, and August Wilson; photographers Jack T. Franklin, Teenie Harris, and John Mosely; artists Selma Burke, Humbert Howard, Paul Keene, Jr., Edmonia Lewis,

Horace Pippin, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Meta Vaux Warrick; journalist Ed Bradley; and humorist Bill Cosby. Dr. Henry M. Minton founded Philadelphia's Mercy Hospital, and Dr. Daniel Hale Williams performed the world's first open-heart surgery. Outstanding athletes from Pennsylvania have included Herb Adderly, Richie Allen, Roy Campanella, Wilt Chamberlain, Reggie Jackson, John. B. Taylor, Emlen Tunnell, and Frank Washington.

According to the 1990 Census, there were 1,072,459 African Americans living in the state. African Americans continue to migrate to and from and within the Commonwealth for much the same reasons as their forebears — to seek a better life.

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# Chronology

## The 17th and 18th Centuries

- 1639 Black laborers used in the Delaware Valley by the Dutch.
- 1684 The ship "Isabella" arrives with 150 African slaves in Philadelphia.
- 1688 Quakers of Germantown issue first resolution condemning slavery.
- 1693 Law is enacted requiring all black slaves to carry passes from their masters.
- 1700 Pennsylvania enacts law that provides legal sanction to the holding of slaves for life.
- 1701 First act of manumission is recorded in the state.
- 1725 Pennsylvania enacts comprehensive black codes, regulating lives of both free and enslaved blacks. Owners are held legally liable for slaves' offenses.
- 1726
- 1767 Pennsylvania bans importation of slaves.
- 1775 The Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage is formed by Benjamin Franklin and others.
- 1776 The Revolutionary War begins. Many African Americans fight on the side of the British or the Americans.
- 1780 Pennsylvania passes a gradual emancipation law, substituting indentured servitude for slavery.
- 1787 Pennsylvania Society for Relief of Free Negroes is reorganized as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones found the Free African Society.
- 1793 The Fugitive Slave Act is enacted by Congress, making it a crime to harbor fugitive slaves.
- 1794 Richard Allen founds the Bethel A.M.E. Church, Absalom Jones the African Church of St. Thomas
- 1797 Black Philadelphians petition the federal government to end slavery and repeal the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act.

## The 19th Century

- 1800 The black population of Pennsylvania is 16,270.
- 1802 Pennsylvania blacks, including Absalom Jones and James Forten, present petition to abolish slavery to U.S. House of Representatives.
- 1812 African Americans fight under Commodore Perry in War of 1812.
- 1830 The first black political convention meets in Philadelphia.
- 1832 Institute for Colored Youth, later Cheyney University, is founded.
- 1833 Black women are part of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.
- 1837 Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society is founded, with James Forten, Robert Purvis and Stephen Smith among its members.
- 1838 Pennsylvania legislature votes to deny blacks right to vote. Anti-abolitionists burn Pennsylvania Hall. William Whipper edits the first black newspaper in Pennsylvania, *The National Reformer*.
- 1848 Downingtown Industrial School is founded. State convention of colored citizens is held in Harrisburg.
- 1850 Fugitive Slave Law makes it a crime to harbor runaway slaves.
- 1851 Christiana riot occurs in which blacks and fugitive slave kill in self-defense. Lawyers led by Thaddeus Stevens win acquittal for them.
- 1854 Lincoln University is founded.
- 1862 Pennsylvania Freedman's Relief Association is started to educate former slaves.
- 1863 First Civil War black recruits arrive at Camp William Penn.

- 1865 Equal Rights Convention protests streetcar segregation in Philadelphia.
- 1867 First black baseball team in the U.S. — The Pythians — is founded in Philadelphia by Octavius Catto and others.
- 1870 The 15th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution gives back to Pennsylvania blacks the right to vote.
- 1871 Community leader Octavius Catto is murdered during election violence in Philadelphia.
- 1884 The *Philadelphia Tribune* is founded by Christopher Perry.
- 1887 Pennsylvania legislature enacts law banning discrimination against blacks in public places/transportation; the law is not strictly enforced.
- 1895 Dr. Nathan F. Mossell, the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, founds the Frederick Douglass Hospital in Philadelphia.
- 1899 W.E.B. Dubois publishes *The Philadelphia Negro*, one of the most important books ever written on Pennsylvania blacks.

## The 20th Century

- 1900 The black population of Pennsylvania is 62,000
- 1910 *The Pittsburgh Courier* is founded.
- 1911 Harry Bass, Republican, is the first black representative elected to Pennsylvania legislature. The Coatesville lynching of Zachariah Walker prompts the founding of an NAACP branch in the state.
- 1915 The Great Migration begins as industry expands in the state, foreign immigration declines, and racial violence rises in the South.
- 1917 Blacks enlist as part of the 92nd and 93rd divisions of the U.S. Army combat troops to fight in World War I. Wartime industry draws more Southern migrants to Pennsylvania. Race riot breaks out in Chester.
- 1918 Philadelphia race riot erupts. The Armstrong Association, Urban League and black churches coordinate effort to assist migrants.
- 1919 Blacks act as strikebreakers in nationwide steel strike.
- 1935 Homer S. Brown becomes the first black Democrat elected to Pennsylvania legislature.
- 1937 Pennsylvania bars racial discrimination by labor unions.
- 1938 Crystal Bird Fauset, Democrat, is the first African-American woman elected to a state legislature.
- 1939 Pennsylvania enacts a law barring discrimination in all public accommodations.
- 1955 Andrew N. Bradley is named state budget secretary, the first black appointed to a Pennsylvania cabinet. Philadelphia-born Marian Anderson is first black singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera.
- 1958 Robert N. C. Nix, Sr., Democrat, is first black congressman elected from Pennsylvania.
- 1966 Blacks protest segregation policy of Girard College.
- 1968 U.S. Supreme Court lets stand lower court ruling that Girard College must desegregate.
- 1969 Federal government tells Pennsylvania to desegregate all public schools and colleges.
- 1977 K. Leroy Irvis is first African American elected to be Speaker of the House in a state legislature.
- 1983 W. Wilson Goode, Sr., is elected the first black mayor of Philadelphia.
- 1985 The house of radical group MOVE in Philadelphia is bombed by state police helicopters. Eleven die; 300 are left homeless.
- 1991 The black population of Pennsylvania is 1,072,459.









Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission